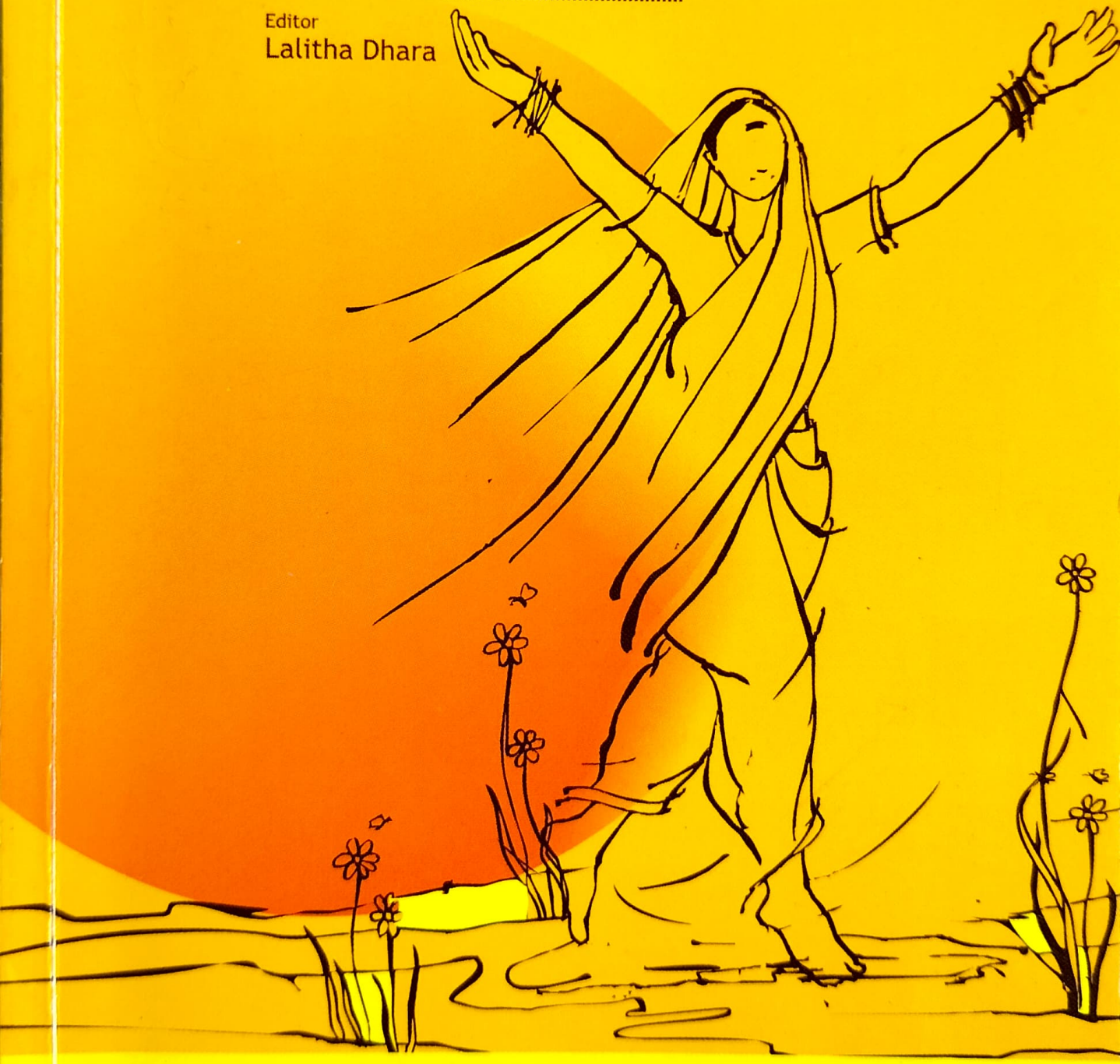
Kavya Phule

Savitri Jotirao Phule

Translated into English by Ujjwala Mhatre

Editor
Lalitha Dhara



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January 2012

To Divya & Tejas,
Happy Phule-Ambedkar Jayanti
14/4/2022

19/12/2019

People's Education Society's

Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce & Economics

presents

Kavyaphule

(poetic blossoms)

A collection of poems in Marathi by Savitri Jotirao Phule (1854)

translated into English by

Ujjwala Mhatre

Editor

Lalitha Dhara

brought out with the support and cooperation of

Principal Dr. S.R.Kamble

for

Women Development Cell, Dr. Ambedkar College Unit

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With deepest respects to

Tathagata Bhagwan Gautam Buddha, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule, Rajarshi Shahu Chhatrapati, Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

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Prof. Mrs. Latifa Kadu, a dear friend and colleague, has always stood by me in whatever I do, whether in the college or outside. I am ever thankful to her for her blanket support.

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Lalitha Dhara

January 2012

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INTRODUCTION

No iconic figure in nineteenth century Maharashtra is as little or as partially understood as Savitribai Phule. It is true that her photograph adorns every government-aided school and educational institution in Maharashtra. Ritual worship such as garlanding of her photograph is religiously carried out before the start of any function but ask any of these educational authorities about her identity and you will get a pat reply that she was the wife of Mahatma Phule. Further probe will elicit the reply that she was the first native woman teacher. Everything else is subsumed in these two statements of fact.

Her work has been ignored, suppressed in her own home state, Maharashtra , for almost a hundred years .Whether the suppression of facts about this warm, passionate, fiery, rebellious woman was by omission (the gender factor) or by commission (the caste factor) or both is difficult to say. Some sporadic efforts to put together her life and work were undertaken but these were piece-meal. Full-fledged biographies of Savitribai began to see the light of day only in the nineteen eighties, the most noteworthy ones being Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule by Dr. M.G. Mali in 1980 and Agniphule by Dr. K.P.Deshpande in 1982. Thanks to the efforts of these scholars, Savitribai has belatedly found her place in the sun. Sadly, all of this work is in Marathi, save one book titled 'A forgotten liberator', published in 2008, in English. Hence, she is virtually unknown outside Maharashtra. This booklet is a humble effort towards introducing Savitribai to people outside her home state.

The first article is a life sketch of Savitribai Phule by Lalitha Dhara. It knits together the sequence of events in her life to enable the reader to understand and appreciate her life and work.

Hardly anyone is aware that Savitribai is considered the first modern radical poet of Maharashtra. In fact, her first book of poems

'Kavyaphule' was published in 1854 when she was merely 23 years old. What is more amazing is that her creative work was published before any of her illustrious husband, Mahatma Phule's writings saw the light of day. All this at a time when women were neither seen nor heard in public, much less published! Jaswandi Wamburkar elaborates on the historic significance of Savitribai's creative contribution in her piece titled, 'Savitribai, the first modern, radical poet of Maharashtra'.

Despite being a pioneering work, Savitribai's 'Kavyaphule' has not been translated so far, except in bits and pieces. One can't but pose the same question again. Is this caste bias at work or gender bias or both? This booklet attempts to make amends, belatedly, humbly. Ujjwala Mhatre has put her heart and soul into the challenging task of translating Savitribai's first collection of poems into English.

Savitribai's poetic creativity forms the core of this booklet. Wamburkar places Savitribai's creativity in a socio-historic context and Dhara attempts to place the Poet herself within a socio-historic context.

Here's hoping our labour of love generates a genuine interest in Savitribai within Maharashtra and a healthy curiosity about her outside the state.

Lalitha Dhara
January 2012

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SAVITRI JOTIRAO PHULE - A LIFE SKETCH

Lalitha Dhara

Who was Savitribai? The woman who was married to Mahatma Phule and followed in his footsteps? The woman who was the first native teacher of girls in India? The first modern poet of Maharashtra? She was all this and more!

In order to understand and appreciate this fact we need to trace the life of Savitri Jotirao Phule - a life that was shaped and moulded by her husband Jotirao and her aunt-in-law Sagunabai. We also need to read her life as it unfolded against the backdrop of the reform movement that took place in nineteenth century Maharashtra – a movement that shaped the couple's world view and which they, in turn, helped shape.

Savitri was born in the village of Naigaon, near Pune, Maharashtra on 3rd January, 1831 as the eldest child to Khandoji Nevshe Patil, a 'Shudra' by caste. It was a time when women were not educated and not meant to be educated. Young Savitri's situation was no different. She did chores in and around the house and helped her father in the fields.

As a child Savitri once went to a weekly bazaar at Shirval with other villagers. While returning she saw some men and women, all foreigners, singing praises of Lord Jesus Christ under a tree. She stopped by, out of curiosity. One of them handed her a booklet. When she hesitated to take it she was told that even if she couldn't read the book, she would enjoy seeing the pictures. Savitri came home and tucked away the little booklet.

When Savitri was nine, she was married to thirteen year old Jotirao Phule. When she left for her husband's house at Pune, she remembered to take the booklet along with her.

Jotirao belonged to the Mali caste whose members were traditionally

gardeners and were considered as 'low caste' or Shudras in the Brahmanical caste hierarchy of Hindu society. This community was not expected to receive education but be subservient to the 'higher castes'.

Despite these odds Jotirao was exposed to English education, thanks to his enlightened aunt Sagunabai, a child widow, who brought him up when his own mother died in his infancy. She nurtured him, instilled good values in him, got him married to Savitri and supported them in their educational activities.

Sagunabai Kshirsagar was born in the village Dhankawadi, Satara district, Maharashtra. She was married off as a child and soon became a widow. To earn a living, she took up a job as a domestic help in the house of a dedicated missionary, Mr. John, who ran an orphanage. She picked up some English from the latter. But more importantly, she absorbed some of the western notions of equality, liberty, fraternity and later infused Jotirao with these values.

She encouraged Jotirao to study and got him admitted to a missionary school. When Jotirao's father, Govindrao, under social pressure, decided to remove him from school, she approached two influential men – Sir Liggit and Mr. Gaffar Baig, both of whom were friends of the former, to persuade Govindrao to revert his decision. Being a bright, sensitive boy, the young Jotirao not only did well academically but started reflecting critically about the ground realities of the vast majority of the rural masses, of which he was a part. He read widely on American democracy, the French revolution and was struck by the logical reasoning in Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man'. His missionary education enabled him to develop egalitarian ideas. His personal experience of humiliation during the marriage ceremony of an 'upper caste' friend in 1848 only added to his resolve to oppose social stratifications, whatever form they might assume.

The turn of the 19th century saw a spurt of social reforms ushered in by men, beginning in Bengal and spreading to other parts of India, including Maharashtra. The British had taken over the western part of

India, Poona, in 1818 marking the end of the Peshwa rule of the Brahmans. The latter were stripped of political power but still had the advantage of lineage, patronage and caste status. This gradually led to the re-fashioning of the Brahmana class, as it were, under colonial rule. The changing political economy saw the emergence of an English-educated middle class who began to examine their socio-cultural practices with the newly acquired lens of western sensibilities. This rising urban section was caught between two worlds – the liberal ideas of the west and the conservative ideas of the Indian Brahmanical social order. They were caught up in many dilemmas like awe of their colonizers and the need to ape them leading to guilt and a desire to showcase their own glorious heritage, real or imaginary. It seemed as if they were looking westward and backward, alternatively. The reforms that were demanded in the early part of the nineteenth century were the cultural and intellectual expression of the socio/economic changes that were sweeping across colonial India. The reform movement was the resolution of all these conflicting dilemmas.

An important aspect of the reforms was the upliftment or betterment of women. The abysmally low status of Indian women and the cruel practices like sati, enforced widowhood, infant marriage, purdah grabbed their attention. They were unable to explain away or rationalize the pathetic condition of women in a supposedly glorious civilization.

The reform movement was largely an upper-caste phenomenon and the subject of their concern, however limited, was the upper-caste woman. Nevertheless it had the potential to go beyond its immediate class\ caste interests and it did, ushering in the entry of non-Brahman reformers like Jotirao Phule. This was possible as English education had managed to percolate to a small section of the urban lower castes as well .

Jotirao's critical enquiry was thus supported by the turbulent times he lived in. He did try to work with the upper-caste reformers within the Pune Sarvajanik Sabha. However, his own low-down position in the caste ladder together with his radicalism meant that he went far beyond

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the superficial understanding of the upper-caste reformers. He soon came into conflict with their limited agenda on the gender question and their utter silence on the caste question. This, together with objective factors such as the cultural and educational impact of British rule and exposure to the liberal ideas and practices of the Christian missionaries, shaped his radical praxis. His analysis led him to realize that education was the key to the liberation of the Shudras, Atishudras - the social outcastes - and women as these sections had been deliberately and forcibly kept away from education by the Brahmanical caste order.

He encouraged his young wife Savitri to read and write, personally coached her and his aunt Sagunabai. The first 'book' that Savitribai read on becoming literate was the one she had brought with her when she married Jotirao. It was the picture-story of Lord Jesus Christ!

After the initial education under her husband, Savitri took up formal education at Ahmednagar and went ahead to get a teacher's training certificate from Pune. One of her classmates and close friend at the teacher training school was Fatima Sheikh. Soon, the Phules started their first school for girls on 15th May, 1848 at Bhidewada in Pune. Savitribai was its headmistress. The school brought together girls of all castes under one roof. The first batch consisted of 25 girls. In the same year they also set up a school for untouchable girls. Savitribai along with Sagunabai, Fatima Sheikh and some male colleagues taught in these schools. Clearly, they were throwing an open challenge to the Brahman monopoly over learning. They went on to start no less than 18 schools over the next four years.

Thus Savitribai, Sagunabai and Fatima made history as the first native women teachers anywhere in India. Fatima was the sister of Usman Sheikh who was a close friend and confidant of Jotiba Phule.

This throwing open of the gates of learning to women, and 'low-caste'ones at that, was a highly provocative act and it was unacceptable to the upper-caste orthodoxy who instigated Govindrao

against his son. The former got carried away and told Jotirao that he would have to choose between continuing with the school and living at his place. Savitri and Jotirao were hurt and disturbed by this ultimatum but undeterred. With heavy hearts they walked away from their father's home, empty-handed. They chose the interest of the larger society over their personal comfort. It was Usman Sheikh who offered shelter and the material means to the Phules to restart their life.

As Savitribai walked to school daily, the villagers would pelt stones and throw dung at her. She would stop by and politely tell them, "My brothers, I am doing the noble job of educating your sisters. The cow dung and stones that you are pelting on me are not a deterrent but rather an inspiration for me. It is as if you are showering petals on me. While I vow to serve my sisters, I also pray; "May God bless you". She dealt with the situation by carrying an extra saree with her to change into, after reaching school.

One day, on her way back from school, a well-built ruffian stood in front of her and threatened her to the effect that if she did not stop educating the Mahars, Mangs (considered untouchables), she would have to pay a heavy price. People gathered to watch this spectacle but none came forward to her rescue. Savitribai remained unfazed and slapped the man hard. The stunned man ran away and so did the onlookers. This news spread like wildfire in Pune and thereafter such incidents did not recur.

Savitribai owed her sensibilities to her husband Jotirao Phule who nurtured her intellect. The Phules had to face stiff opposition for their educational activities, especially promotion of women's education. According to tradition, justified by many Brahmanical texts, women were not to receive education, at any cost. The reformers wanted limited education for women to enable them to be better wives and companions to the newly educated class of men and enlightened mothers to their children. Phule's dream, in sharp contrast, was to see that the women of

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India enjoyed their full human rights through education which, he hoped, would lead them to revolt against their exploitation and oppression. Savitribai was Jotirao Phule's partner in the realisation of his dream.

The trajectory of Savitribai's life is as fascinating as it is awe-inspiring. She was a first- generation learner and a newly literate person when she started composing poetry and managed to have it published in 1854, at the age of twenty three. In her poems she addresses social issues like getting an English education, fighting caste and untouchability. Even if we assume that she had been schooled into these thoughts by her husband Jotirao, one cannot but admire what a fast learner she was and how well she had assimilated the lessons learnt. She sounds deeply convinced and convincing in her poems. She also seems to be the first person who had understood and assessed her husband's pioneering role in the liberation of the exploited masses. She categorically states in her last poem, 'Dialogue at dawn' (Poem 41) that Jotiba is the new dawn on the untouchables' horizon. She hails him as the messiah of the downtrodden. In a sense, she is heralding him and predicting his future role. The events that unfolded over the next thirty-five years proved her prediction right.

A broad analysis of her poems in 'Kavyaphule' reveals that Savitribai had many sides and shades to her nature and personality. Apart from her sober public persona, she had a romantic and sensuous streak which broke through centuries of conditioning and socialization and found bold expression through her poetry, secure in the warm support of her husband. This can be gleaned from her poems addressed to him. They are unconventional and modern even by today's standards.

After a spate of schools, the Phules turned their attention to other social evils. Child marriage was the norm in society, particularly among the 'upper' castes. Young girls were married to old men and more often than not became child widows. The tradition of treating a widow as a ritually impure social outcaste was rigidly practiced. The child widows, many of them virgins, were deprived of colourful saris, flowers in their

hair, ornaments. They were donned in white or saffron saris, their heads tonsured. Widowhood spelt the death of their social and sexual life but ironically increased their sexual vulnerability and exploitation by the males in the family against whom they were defenseless and faced further disgrace if they happened to become pregnant as a result. This often left them with no choice but to take their own life, their infant's life or both.

One such gruesome incident was that of a young Brahman widow, Kashibai who was sexually exploited and became pregnant. In utter desperation, she threw the infant into a well. A police case was filed against her and she was sentenced to life in prison in 1863. This incident brought home the miserable plight of the Brahmin child widow to the Phules. In response, they opened up their home to the pregnant child widows. They plastered the walls of the Brahmanwada { the Brahman locality) with posters inviting the widows to come to their home, deliver the child, stay back or leave, with or without the child. They were offered so many options where earlier they had only one – taking their own lives. Such was Savitribai's empathy with the widows that she took the initiative, along with Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, to mobilize the barbers of Pune into refusing to tonsure them.

Savitribai personally and lovingly tended to these young women and their children in their home. She often invited all the neighboring children to dinner. She was radiantly happy in their midst. This has been recorded by Dhananjay Keer in his biography of Phule.

Savitribai and Jotirao were childless. There was immense pressure on Jotirao to remarry in order to produce an heir but he would have none of it. His argument was, "what if I am responsible for the state of childlessness? In that case would you allow Savitri to remarry?" Instead, they chose to adopt a child. It so happened that once, in the year 1874, while taking a stroll in the dead of night on the banks of the river Mutha, Jotirao saw the figure of a woman about to take a dive in the river with the intention of committing suicide. He ran and caught her. He learnt

that she was a widow, six months pregnant and a victim of rape. Jotirao consoled her and took her home. Savitribai accepted her with open arms. The woman delivered a male child who was named Yashwant. The Phules adopted Yashwant and made him their legal heir. They educated him to be a doctor. By their unusual and unconventional act of adoption, the Phules challenged many pre-conceived notions of caste, lineage, paternity, motherhood etc.

The same Brahmanical patriarchal system which put women under fetters also banished the so-called untouchables to the margins of society where they led a sub-human existence. They could not cross the path of the upper castes nor have access to the water bodies in the villages. The Phules, in another defiant act, threw open the well in their compound to the untouchables in 1868. This was a brazen and bold step in those times.

Savitribai was a committed grass-roots worker and was on the move constantly - talking to the villagers in and around Pune, castigating them for their vices, motivating them to educate themselves and improve their lives. Her speeches on debt, addiction, education, good conduct was published in 1892 and is a moving testimony to her passionate involvement with people.

The following incident speaks volumes about Savitribai's approach to love and life. In 1868, Savitri had come down to her mother's place to recover from an illness. One day she heard that the villagers had gathered in large numbers to kill a couple who were in love with each other, as they belonged to different castes. The boy was a Brahman while the girl belonged to an 'untouchable' caste. Savitri rushed to the market square, used all her authority and saved the besieged couple from certain death.

The Phules firmly believed in inter-caste marriages as one of the means to break down the caste system. They personally supported people who chose to inter-marry, even if they had to resort to police assistance to do so. They also got several widows remarried, braving terrible opposition.

Phule dreamt of freeing people from the twin scourges of Brahmanical patriarchy and caste enslavement. To this end, he began to work on several fronts. He published the first challenging critique of Brahmanical Hindu religion. He campaigned for mass education of women and the depressed castes. Most importantly, he gave the clarion call for the oppressed people of India —*stree, Shudra and Atishudra*, as he termed them, to come together to smash slavery, assert their human rights and liberate themselves. For this, he founded a society called the Satyashodak Samaj as a socio-spiritual movement on September 24, 1873. Entire families were its members.

Savitribai headed the women's unit of the Satyashodhak Samaj. Weekly meetings were held in Pune where issues like mass education, widow remarriage etc. were discussed and debated. The Samaj took the lead in breaking the priestly hold over society by conducting marriages sans Brahman priests or religious rituals. The couple would merely exchange vows where they would commit their lives to each other and to the welfare of society. This laid the foundation of civil marriages in India, both inter- caste and inter- religious.

The Sabha provided a platform for debates and discussions on caste and gender issues. Phule condemned the practice of a woman immolating herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and becoming a sati and questioned if a man would return the gesture and become a sata if the situation was reversed?

In the late 1870s, the Phules were actively involved in famine relief. They were instrumental in starting 52 boarding schools for the welfare of children orphaned in the famine.

Mahatma Phule passed away on November 28, 1890. Even at the funeral, Savitribai showed her gritty character. A controversy broke out as to who should conduct the last rites – the adopted son or a male blood relative. Savitribai put an end to it by stepping forward to light the pyre, once again bypassing conventions. This one act spoke volumes for her

self-assurance and courage, proving that she was not a typical Indian woman.

Another collection of Savitribai's poems, *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (The Ocean of Pure Gems) was published in 1892. It is a biography, in verse, of Mahatma Jotiba Phule, as Jotirao came to be known. Phule had developed a devastating critique of the Brahman interpretation of Maratha history in the ancient and medieval periods. Savitribai's biography was as much about the Maratha history as it was about her husband. Savitribai also edited and published four of Jotiba's speeches on Indian History in 1856. Savitribai's three letters to Jotiba spread over twenty years is also a precious and rare piece of literature as women rarely wrote letters in those days, leave alone to their spouses. It was considered a sacrilege, if not worse. Moreover, she addressed her husband by name! She discussed social issues in her letters. Their mutual respect and trust is more than evident from these letters.

Savitribai was probably one of the first published women in modern India, and was able to develop her own voice and agency at a time when women of all classes were ruthlessly suppressed and lived a sub-human existence. She was actively supported and constantly encouraged in this endeavour by her husband and mentor Jotiba.

Savitribai internalized the vision and philosophy of Phule, and was an ardent supporter of his work. The Phule couple shared a very close and loving bond. They were loyal and committed to one another and their common life-work.

Savitribai took over the Satyashodhak Samaj after the death of her husband. She presided over the meeting of the Samaj in 1893 in Saswad. In the drought of 1896, Savitribai worked ceaselessly, and brought pressure on the government to undertake relief measures. In 1897, an epidemic of plague swept Pune. Savitribai was once again engaged personally in the relief effort. Unfortunately, she caught the disease and died on 10th March, 1897.

Savitribai was a major figure of her time. An able and committed companion to her husband, she was a revolutionary in her own right. Overcoming tremendous odds, she rose to become an inspiring and capable teacher, leader, thinker and writer.

Savitribai was an exemplary role model for the modern Indian woman during her lifetime. She is and will continue to be so for times to come. The historic handicaps of caste, class and gender in nineteenth century Maharashtra could not restrain or subdue her intense passion for love, life and liberty.

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SAVITRIBAI PHULE
THE FIRST MODERN *VIDROHI* (RADICAL) POET

Jaswandi Wamburkar

Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) is little-known as a radical social reformer in India. In spite of, or maybe because of, being the wife of the great social reformer Mahatma Phule, her work did not receive independent recognition for a long time. The post-nineteen sixties witnessed the emergence of the Dalit movement in India. This period also marked the flowering of Dalit literature. With the emergence and development of second wave feminism, historians started relocating the role of women in history and also re-writing history through a feminist lens. It is not surprising that this period witnessed the publication of various biographies of Savitribai. However Savitribai Phule, as the first modern radical Marathi poet, was unknown even within the contemporary Marathi speaking society of Maharashtra. The present work aims at highlighting the importance of her literature from the feminist perspective.

Senior scholar Dr. M. G. Mali[1] published her first biography in 1980. His work received a mixed response. Many scholars and activists congratulated him for discovering and making the unknown writings of Savitribai Phule public. Few condemned her work as 'an act of sheer forgery and theft'.[2] This kind of attack came from none other than Dr. S. G. Malashe, a well-known scholar. He reduced Savitribai's image to that of a 'docile housewife following in her husband's footsteps'. For a long time, Savitribai was portrayed in this manner, casting doubts on her creative ability. A lot of ink was spilt in establishing the authenticity of Savitribai's writings.

K. P. Deshpande's book 'Agniphule'[3] is the first work that developed a critique of Savitribai's writings. Her 'creativity' has come a long way

since then. Her writings have now been incorporated in the syllabi of postgraduate studies of Marathi literature in several universities.

One of the fact-findings of the feminist critics in the West is that men's writing is generally positioned as 'the norm' as if it was somehow representative of all 'great writing.'[4] The process of choosing 'great texts' for inclusion in the literary canon involves a set of assumptions about what makes literature great. A complementary finding is that there is a considerable body of writing, much of it by women, which has either been ignored or suppressed for generations. Even those women writers who have been acknowledged are either misrepresented or portrayed in such a manner as to nullify the significance of their work. Therefore, it becomes all the more important to unearth such hidden women writers and make them 'visible' through the pages of history.

Though these observations have been made in the context of Western literature, these findings are equally valid for Marathi literature. Even a cursory glance at the various books on the history of Marathi literature proves this assertion. Considering the inter-connections between the issues of caste and gender, one can easily see why the literature of women and Dalits was either neglected or silenced for a long time in India. Mahatma Phule's contemporary, Vishnushastri Chiplunkar described himself as the '*Shivaji of Marathi language*'. He denounced Mahatma Phule's literature examining it merely through the lens of Marathi language and grammar. This was a ploy to brush aside the radical content of his writings. According to Chiplunkar, Brahmins were the sole custodians of knowledge and he sought to maintain this Brahmanical hegemony. Most of the twentieth century literary critics and historians of Marathi literature followed the legacy of Chiplunkar. Several works on the history of Marathi literature have invalidated Mahatma Phule's writings.

History is no more a mere narration of facts but the reconstruction of the past in the context of the present. Literature as compared to the

archival sources is now considered as an equally significant, authentic and credible source of history writing. Like history, literature also has the parameters of time, space, individual and society. A historian aims at understanding the social ethos of any given period. Literature is not only a medium in which the social ethos of any period resonates but it is an equally powerful instrument of creating and disseminating the new social ethos. Savitribai's writings were important both as the force and the product of the social ethos of nineteenth century Maharashtra.

The Peshwa rule came to an end in 1818 in Maharashtra. Modernity was reshaping itself under the yoke of colonial rule. The newly educated middle class got introduced to modern, western values such as liberty, equality, fraternity, rationalism, individualism, scientific temper etc. This newly educated intelligentsia started looking at their cultural heritage, armed with a new, critical perspective. This phenomenon gave rise to what is known as renaissance. Renaissance was a bridge that took India from medievalism to modernity. This movement manifested itself in various spheres such as education, literature, art, music and so on. It was a period of the rise of not only new literary forms such as the play, novel, essay and sonnet but the content of literature also underwent a profound change.[5]

Though many events in Savitribai's life are quite well known by now, they need to be rearranged to understand her flowering as a poet. It would also be necessary to reinterpret those historical facts that strengthened the possibility of Savitribai's emergence as a poet.

Savitribai was born on 3rd January 1831 into the family of a gardener, from the Shudra community, at Naigaon, a small village near Pune. She was married to Jotirao at the age of nine. Jotirao started educating her at home. After completing her schooling at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar she did her diploma in education in the 'Normal School' of Ms. Mitchell in Pune. In 1848, the Phules started the first school for girls in Bhidewada, Pune. Savitribai used to teach in this school and was

its headmistress. From 1848 till her death in 1897 she devoted her life to the social cause. Her first collection of poems 'Kavyaphule' was published in 1854 before any of Jotirao's writing![6]

The chief social movements that developed in the nineteenth century in Maharashtra were for the eradication of the caste system, eradication of untouchability and the women's reform movement. The contribution of the Phules to all these movements was seminal. The feminist thought developed by Mahatma Phule is still relevant in today's world. While most of his contemporaries were engaged in superficial reforms without, in any way, threatening the hierarchical set-up of caste, class and gender, Phule wanted to change the patriarchal system and ideology along with caste and untouchability. The Bahujan / lower-caste / lower-class woman was always at the centre of his thoughts and action. He showed that the issues of caste and gender were interrelated and that Indian women were not a homogeneous category. Mahatma Phule's three disciples Savitribai, Mukta and Tarabai were the products of his radical movement. Fourteen-year-old Mukta's essay (1855) is a clear vindication of Phule's subversive message. No other women's writings of the nineteenth century could match the radical tone of Tarabai Shinde's 'Stree-Purush Tulana' (1882).

Mahatma Phule[8] believed that the practice of unequal marriage and child marriage led to untimely widowhood and adultery, with its disastrous consequences of abortion or infanticide. The Vijayalakshmi case (1881) and many similar cases of the nineteenth century justify this premise. Phule condemned the double standards of the Hindu Brahmanical patriarchy which, while disallowing widow-remarriage, happily permitted re-marriage for men. Realizing the miserable condition of the 'fallen' women, the Phules showed rare courage in starting a home for them and their children. Savitribai used to personally look after the pregnant women as well as the children.

As far as the movement for eradication of caste is concerned, social

reformers like Balshastri Jambhekar, Lokhitwadi, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, could not go beyond their class/caste limitations. In contrast, Mahatma Phule initiated a social revolt against the exploitation of the Shudras, Atishudras by both the colonial system and the Brahmanic social order. Caste for him was not merely an economic category but also a cultural category, roots of which had gone deep into the social psyche. According to Phule, various cultural tools such as myths, literature, religious ideas, philosophy, social norms, practices and history-writing were used to keep the Shudras, Atishudras and women in perpetual slavery.

Savitribai was in the company of such a radical social reformer from the age of nine. Jotirao launched all his experiments on women's education, opening of an orphanage (Bal Hatya Pratibandhak Griha), Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of truth seekers) jointly with Savitribai. She was a courageous and dynamic woman who stood by her husband and supported his radical projects when other family members of Jotirao resisted and finally deserted him. Against this backdrop, Savitribai's emergence as a radical poet is hardly surprising.

The influence of Jotirao's thought on Savitribai is quite apparent in her writings. Nonetheless, her writings were not a blind imitation of his thought. She had internalized his thought and had the intellectual capacity to understand its significance. Savitribai was an independent person who found expression in and through her poetry. She had a taste of the new ideas and the message of modernity that were gaining currency through education and the renaissance movement. She enjoyed the companionship of a progressive husband like Jotirao. It is more than probable that, living in such a stimulating atmosphere and in such exciting times, Savitribai might have received enough space for her personal growth. All these factors might have resulted in the building of poetic fervour in her.

The very fact that women who had remained silent for centuries started articulating themselves was an indicator of change. A new woman was born in the form of Savitribai. This new woman was different from

the traditional Indian woman. She was curious to learn. She had started reading, writing and raising questions about her own status. She had started to imbibe the message of modernity. She had started questioning patriarchal notions and stereotypes about the ideal Indian woman and was posing new questions. She had started perceiving herself in a new light. Savitribai's writings echoed the agonies, aspirations, thoughts and feelings of this newly-emerging Indian woman.

Savitribai had great respect for Jotirao, which is evident from her initial poems in 'Kavyaphule'. Three poems in 'Kavyaphule'[9] are dedicated to Jotirao. She has expressed her joy in having a husband like him. She writes,

"Jotiba fills my life with joy
As nectar does a flower..."
and
"...I am blessed with a man renowned
My happiness knows no bounds..."
(Poem 6).

This is a very bold expression on her part. She is open about her feelings of love for her husband in sharp contrast to other contemporary women writers. Ramabai Ranade's autobiography[10] , for instance, was actually the disguised biography of her husband, M. G. Ranade. She has referred to him throughout the autobiography in the first person as she might have found it awkward to mention her husband by name. It was a very old convention in upper caste families in India that the wife would not utter the name of her husband either in private or public. Ramabai's autobiography was published in 1910. It is truly remarkable that Savitribai's poetry, published almost sixty years before Ramabai's work, did away with such conventions. One also needs to attribute the difference and diversity in women's literary expression to the different levels of patriarchal pressure exerted on women of different castes.

Savitribai's poems on nature express an altogether different flavour.

She looks upon nature as a living entity. In some of the poems she has narrated how her heart rejoices when she sees the natural beauty of flowers. She describes,

"...As Madan, his beloved Rati entices
So does the Champa stir the poet's senses..."
(Poem 17).

She has also recited how tender feelings of love are evoked in her heart at seeing beautiful flowers in the words:

"...Her sweet smile and demure gaze
Sends my mind into a daze..."
(Poem 18).

She has very openly expressed her sensual desires which was unheard of in those times. None of the nineteenth century women writers have revealed their inner feelings as candidly as Savitribai has done.

Woman in the nineteenth century was leading the life of a sub-human. She was considered an object of male desire. Savitribai's poetry reflected the anger of the newly- emerging Indian woman who wanted to be treated as a human being and not just an object of male lust. She has portrayed a graphic picture of the relationship between the butterfly and the flower in a clear reference to the dialectics in a man-woman relationship. She has asserted in this poem that a woman is also a human being, experiencing emotions such as love, longing and desire. She also has the right to fall in love. She is disturbed by the frivolous nature of man for whom she has used the metaphor of a butterfly. Savitribai has echoed the agonies of the Indian women caught in exploitative sexual relationships. She narrates,

"So beautiful is she and so tender
To him does she her heart surrender".
Further,
"...Tastes her sweetness, casts her away
Not a glance does he throw her way

Abandons her, finds pastures green
No sense of shame does he ever feel…"
(Poem 21).

Nature in her poetry is not merely a symbol of beauty but the very basis of life on earth. She recites,

"Farming is divine, gives a harvest ripe
Food grains that are the essence of life…"
(Poem 32).

"…Words cannot describe the glory of the soil
Oh! The deep bond of the earth with those who toil..."
(Poem 23).

The farmer who feeds humankind is at the centre of her poems. The people involved in agriculture naturally cultivate a very close and eternal relationship with the soil, sky, sun, water, cattle, birds, flowers and trees. All this is reflected in her poems. She expresses,

"The rains have drenched the fields, bathed Nature pure and clean
Fruits, flowers and pulses all are invigorated and green…"
(Poem 22).

Many of her poems evoke the imagery of the serene and peaceful life in the countryside of rural India. This is also depicted in the poems expressing her nostalgic memories of her birthplace, Naigaon:

"…Plentiful rains yield a bountiful harvest
In the garden near the well, fruits and flowers at their best
Melodious birdsong fills the air, butterflies flit around
Nature abounds in every sight and sound…"
(Poem 16).

This poem shows the affection and reminiscence that a woman feels for her natal place. There are differences of opinion among scholars[11] about the influence of romanticism on Savitribai. It is difficult to gauge how well acquainted she was with Western romanticist poetry. Her love for nature seems more in tune with the Indian folk tradition rooted in

Indian agriculture. Her poems resonate with the spirit of Marathi folk songs, especially of Marathi traditional women's songs[12] that have survived through the ages via oral tradition. Savitribai's work was in continuity with the literary tradition of Maharashtra. Being an activist, Savitribai might have had a specific audience in her mind which is why she may have selected traditional folk forms like the *Abhang*. Her language is simple and free of jargon. Although the forms are conventional, the content of her writings is new and rebellious.

The material changes that took place in the nineteenth century created an imbalance in the power-relations of the caste-based social structure on the one hand and the patriarchal family-structure on the other. It necessitated the redefinition of the identities of man and woman thereby recasting gender relations[13]. Most of the literature authored by men, during this period, expressed the stereotypical image of the contemporary Indian woman in the Brahmanical mould - as the chaste and self-sacrificing 'Pativrata'- with an amalgam of the Victorian model of the housewife and companionate spouse. In striking contrast, Savitribai has invoked the image of an 'Ideal Indian man' in one of her poems. According to her, one who looks after his family with care and responsibility, one who does not live off his wife, one who is industrious and inquisitive, one who has a quest for knowledge, one who is a worshiper of freedom, one who is caring, sacrificing and dedicated is an ideal man (Poem 34).

One of her poems stresses the organic oneness of human beings with other creatures on the earth in the following words:

"... Human beings and all of creation are but two sides of a coin
To preserve these priceless bounties let us our hands join..."
(Poem 22).

Elsewhere she reinforces the humanitarian philosophy by asserting the uniqueness of human beings. She recounts,

"...As unique and sweet as the Rose, the human race
Remember, thus Savitri spake"

(Poem 20).

That the human being was the measure of all things was the essence of the renaissance. Savitribai's poems echo this essence. Her humanism had no barrier of caste, creed, nation or religion.

Most of her poems are dedicated to the themes of knowledge and education, which has its roots in the social context of that period. The changing political economy, the new British administration and the introduction of English education - all these factors gave rise to the emergence of the middle class[1] in Maharashtra. The middle class comprised the upper as well as the lower strata of society in terms of caste. The new opportunities of occupations made available by the new education and new economy resulted in upward social mobility for this small section.

However, most of the people in the lower strata of society were deprived of educational facilities and hence of upward mobility. The Phule couple envisioned a society wherein all the Shudras, Atishudras and women would get the benefit of education and emancipate themselves. Several of Savitribai's poems are devoted to this theme.

One of her poems expresses the idea that education develops the rational spirit:

"... Cast away the yoke of custom
Prise open the doors of tradition..."
(Poem 38).

According to Savitribai, education infuses in people the spirit of humanism. It seeks to remove the inferiority complex that 'low-caste' people have harboured for ages. It gives them a new ray of hope and a new vision about the future. It makes them self-reliant, industrious. It gives them the strength to break away from tradition. She narrates,

"... With this clarion call arise, strive hard to gain knowledge
Rise for education, break the shackles of tradition and bondage..."
(Poem 36).

Education is a panacea for self-development of the downtrodden people. These poems signify a revolt against blind faith and orthodoxy that kept the masses in unending slavery. It will not be inappropriate therefore to regard Savitribai as the 'first *vidrohi* (radical) poet' of Maharashtra.

Few of the poems by Savitribai have been composed for her students in the school. The poems titled 'Welcome Song', ' Walkie-Talkie Doll' give testimony to this assertion. 'Group Discussion' is one of the vigorous poems that seem to be intentionally composed to emphasize the significance of education on the impressionable minds of these young school-girls. (Poems 24, 27, 28). This seems to be the message of Savitribai to the womenfolk of India. Savitribai's poems represent the vision of the awakened, liberated and emancipated woman after a long period of silence in history. She has rightly pointed out that the daughters/young girls in poor families are forced to perform domestic work and that is why they remain deprived of education. The 'mother' in her poetry is an enlightened being who has realized the importance of education. She says:

"... To live with your head held high
Get an education, go to school
The real ornament of humankind is learning..."
(Poem 28).

This was a highly un-conventional image of women in general and mothers in particular.

Lokhitwadi through his 'Shatapatre' (Hundred Letters) put forth a fiery critique about the human tendencies such as fatalism, redundancy, languor and stagnation. He affirmed that India met defeat at the hands of the British on account of these flaws. Lokhitwadi's 'Shatapatre' demonstrated the grief of the newly awakened middle class in India. Savitribai's poems too epitomized the yearnings of the emancipated woman for change.

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Savitribai showed that it is not enough to provide opportunities of education to those who have been denied that right for centuries. What is needed is to inculcate in them the taste and passion for education. She has made a plea to the children to get up early, freshen up and concentrate on their studies:

"...Let knowledge be your God, pursue it all the way
With determination attain success, don't let your mind sway..."
(Poem 25).

Savitribai's second collection of poems 'Bavankashi Subodh Ratnakar' (1892) was the first poetic biography of Mahatma Phule. It is also the first effort to write a poetic history of the slavery and liberation of the Shudras, Atishudras and women. It was Mahatma Phule who asserted for the first time that Indian history was basically a struggle between Aryan and Non-Aryan traditions.

Mahatma Phule's historical writings are free from the influence of the imperialist periodization of Indian history as Hindu-Muslim-British. He shattered the age-old understanding of the Indian past and traditions and explored the possibilities of alternative history-writing[15]. Phule, in that sense, became the exponent of 'little traditions' in India. Savitribai has put forth an analogous argument that the history of India was a struggle between the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin traditions. She envisaged Indian history from the Vedic period to the British period, marking the movement initiated by Mahatma Phule as the turning point in the history of India. According to her, the advent of the British rule and the rise of Phule's movement was the dawn of liberation for the Shudras, Atishudras and women. So, these sections are at the centre of her history-writing. Mahatma Phule's uniqueness, in her opinion, lies in the fact that he didn't merely ponder over social reform but became the active exponent of such a movement. It was Savitribai who for the first time projected Mahatma Phule as the emancipator of women, Shudras and Atishudras. Therefore even after admitting the profound influence of her husband's thought on her work, the biography of Mahatma Phule penned by her is

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a very valuable document in the history of modern Marathi literature.

Within the social reform movement, there were three trends[16] that developed in Maharashtra in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first made an attempt to revive the old and opposed the new. The second, being the liberal one, attempted a fusion of traditional and modern values. Mahatma Phule, representing the third, revolted against the elite, Brahmanical, Vedic tradition and revived the non-Vedic traditions by creating icons like Gautam Buddha, King Bali, Shivaji, and Tarabai. It is noteworthy that Savitribai has written a poem on Tarabai. It is significant in that it was the first ballad penned by a woman on a brave, female, historical figure (poem 9). Her poem on King Shivaji attaches importance - being a poem composed by a female writer amidst the many compositions of male-writers on the popular political figure, Shivaji (poem 8).

Savitribai's writings undeniably show the influence of the thoughts of Mahatma Phule. Even so, Savitribai's writings were an independent expression. Her poetic zeal and literary merits are also beyond any doubt and debate. Her writings demonstrate the influence of folk songs, *Bhakti* poetry and the *Shahiri* form (ballad literature). Though she selected traditional forms, she consistently propagated modern values such as humanism, liberty, equality, brotherhood and rationalism through her writings. The uniqueness of her writings gets underlined when compared and contrasted with her contemporaries' works.

According to some scholars, the period from 1800 to 1874 has been an age of translation in the history of Marathi literature[17]. Even a cursory review of this literature[18]is revealing. Godbole's 'Navneet' (1854) on the lines of 'Golden Treasury', B. R. Pradhan's 'Daivseni' based on Walter Scott's 'The Lady of the Lake', K. R. Kirtikar's 'Indira'-an adaptation of Tennyson's 'Princess', A. M. Mahajani's 'Kusumanjali'(translated work), and 'Vilapalahari of Kirtikar'–to name a few, contain very little originality in terms of form or content. The literature that came up from 1885 to 1920 was considered as modern Marathi literature.[19] It is noteworthy in this context that Savitribai's

writings were marked with originality and manifested a very radical outlook towards women, nature and society almost twenty years before the emergence of modern Marathi literature.

It is only in the last decade of the nineteenth century that independent collections of women's poetry in Marathi started getting published in Maharashtra.[20] The phase from 1850 to 1900 is known as a period of foundation building so far as women's writings in Marathi are concerned. The nature of the poetry of women writers in this era is a sort of compilation of traditional women's songs. They were merely reproducing the images of the Puranic/ mythological Pativrata women such as Savitri, Sita and Draupadi. Savitribai, in contrast to them, has expressed the yearnings of the modern Indian woman through her writings. It is only in the third decade of the twentieth century that poets like Mathurabai Pandit, Shantadevi Paradeshi and Laxmibai Tilak started publishing poems marked by originality. Laxmibai Tilak is privileged as the first modern Marathi poetess in Maharashtra. This is sheer injustice to Savitribai who wrote poetry infused with modernity nearly seventy to eighty years prior to Laxmibai.

Since long there has been a debate among the scholars about the motherhood of modern Marathi poetry. K. P. Deshpande and M. G. Mali have regarded Savitribai as 'the mother of modern Marathi poetry'[21] . Keshavasuta[22] has been considered as 'the father of modern Marathi poetry'. However, Keshavasuta wrote his first poem in 1885 i.e. nearly thirty years after Savitribai's work. Dr. Ashok Chopade[23] has named Mahatma Phule as 'the father of modern Marathi poetry'. Looking at the issue as an objective historical fact, one has to admit that the writings of all these three poets are modern in terms of their content. Nonetheless it was Savitribai's work, which got published before the other two. It would not be wrong therefore to consider Savitribai as the first modern vidrohi (radical) poet in Marathi.

I am extremely thankful to Dr. S. M. alias Raja Dixit, my Guru, and Lalitha Dhara, the editor of this work, for their comments and suggestions.

Footnotes and references :

[1]For more details see-
a. M. G. Mali, *Krantijyoti Savitribaibai Jyotirao Phule*,(Marathi) Asha Prakashan, Gargoti, 1980.
b.Dr. M. G. Mali, *Savitribaibai Phule-Samagra Vangamaya*, (Marathi), Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal, Mumbai, 2006, (First edition: 1988). (Henceforth '*...Vangamaya*').

[2] S. G. Malashe, *Taratamya,*(Marathi),Parachure Prakashan, Mumbai, 1986, pp. 47-62.

[3] Dr. K. P. Deshpande,
Agniphule: Savitribaibai Phule Yanchi Kavita: Swaroop ani Samiksha, (Marathi) ,Nutan Prakashan, Pune, 1982.

[4] Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds.), *Women Writing in India: 600 B. C. to the Present, Vol. 1*, The Feminist Press, Newyork, 1991, pp. 12-36.

[5] For more details see-
a. Raja Dixit, *Itihas, Samajvichar ani Keshavasuta*, (Marathi), Lokvangamaya Gruha, Mumbai, 1993, chapter 3.(Henceforth '...Keshavasuta').
b. G. M. Kulkarni, *Adhunik Marathi Vangamayachi Sanstrutik Parshwabhumi*,(Marathi), Mehta Publishing House, Pune, 1994, pp. 21-89.

[6] Jotirao Phule's works got published in this order: 'Trutiya Ratna' (1855), 'Brahmanache Kasab' (1869), 'Shivajicha Powada' (1869), 'Gulamgiri' (1873), 'Shetakaryacha Aasud' (1883) and 'Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Poostak' (1891). For more details please see-
Y. D. Phadke, *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangamaya*, (Marathi), Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal, Mumbai, 1991.

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[1]For more details see-
a. M. G. Mali, *Krantijyoti Savitribaibai Jyotirao Phule*,(Marathi) Asha Prakashan, Gargoti, 1980.
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b. G. M. Kulkarni, *Adhunik Marathi Vangamayachi Sanstrutik Parshwabhumi*,(Marathi), Mehta Publishing House, Pune, 1994, pp. 21-89.

[6] Jotirao Phule's works got published in this order: 'Trutiya Ratna' (1855), 'Brahmanache Kasab' (1869), 'Shivajicha Powada' (1869), 'Gulamgiri' (1873), 'Shetakaryacha Aasud' (1883) and 'Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Poostak' (1891). For more details please see-
Y. D. Phadke, *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangamaya*, (Marathi), Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal, Mumbai, 1991.

[7] For more details see-
Jaswandi Wamburkar, 'Itihas, Strivad ani Maharastratil Strivishayak Vastav: Vibhavari Shirurkar: Vishesh Abhyas',(Marathi),Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation, University of Pune, Pune, 2006, chapter 2.

[8] For more details see-
a.Yashawant Sumant, 'Stree Muktichi Pahat', (Marathi), in *Milun Saryajani*, Pune, February 1999, pp. 21-26.
b.Jaswandi Wamburkar, 'Maharashtratil Prabodhan: Strisudharana Chalaval', (Marathi), in *Itihas Shiskshak*, Issue July-August-Septemeber 2010, pp.13-20.

[9] All the verses used in this article have been taken from the same book and they have been rendered into English by Ms. Ujjwala Mhatre. The number of each poem has been given in the bracket.

[10] Ramabai Ranade, *Amachya Ayushyatil Kahi Aathavani*, (Marathi), Manoranjak Granth Prasarak Mandali, Mumbai, 1910, passim.

[11] Bhalachandra Phadke, Introduction, in Dr. K. P. Deshpande, op.cit, pp. 5-16.

[12] Dr. Tara Bhawalkar, *Loksahityatil Stree Pratima*, (Marathi), Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 1988.

[13] For more details see-
Jaswandi Wamburkar- Utagikar, 'Recasting 'Indian' Woman and Marathi Theatre: A Case Study of Sharada', in Shraddha Kumbhojkar (ed.), *19th Century Maharashtra: A Reassessment,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, New Castle Upon Tyne, U. K., 2009, pp. 49-57.

[14] For more details, see-
Dr. Raja Dixit, *Ekonisavya Shatakatil Maharashtra: Madhyamvargacha Uday*, (Marathi), Diamond Publications, Pune, 2009.

[15] Dr. Arvind Deshpande, 'Paryayi sanskrutiche Janak', (Marathi), in Hari Narake (ed.) *Shodhachya Navya Vata*, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule ani Rajashri Shahu Charitra Sadhane Prakashan Samiti, Mumbai, 1998.

[16] Jaswandi Wamburkar,'Locating the gender-related work of the Phules within Women's Reform Movement of nineteenth century Maharashtra', in Lalitha Dhara (ed.), *Phules and Women's Question*, Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai, 2011, pp. 5-15.

[17] Raja Dixit, '...*Keshavasuta*', op.cit. , p.51.

[18] For more details see-
R. S. Jog (ed.), *Marathi Vangamayacha Itihas, Vol. 4,* (Marathi), Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad, Pune, 1973.

[19] Ibid.

[20] For more details see-
Aruna Dhere, 'Kavita', (Marathi), in Dr. Manda Khandge, Dr. Lila Dixit, Dr. Aruna Dhere and Vinaya Khadapekar (eds.), *Stree Sahityacha Magova Volume I*, Sahityapremi Bhagini Mandal, Vol. I, Pune, 2002, 49-81.

a. Dr. K. P. Deshpande, op. cit., p. 118.
b. Mali,'...*Vangamaya*' op. cit., p. thirty-eight.

[22] Raja Dixit, '...*Keshavasuta* ', op.cit., p.56.

[23] Dr. Ashok Chopade, 'Adhunik Marathi Kaviteche Janak', (Marathi),in Hari Narake (ed.) *Shodhachya Navya Vata*, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule ani Rajashri Shahu Charitra Sadhane Prakashan Samiti, Mumbai, 1998, p. 246.

❖❖❖

Kavyaphule

Savitri Jotiba - 1854 A.D.

1
Offerings

The faith that all repose in me, O Almighty!
Overwhelms me, makes me wonder of it am I worthy?
For my benefactors my heart fills with gratitude
To my well-wishers I offer this floral tribute

❖❖❖

2
Offerings

These fragrant flowers I offer thee
Strung in a garland of rhymes
Each poetic blossom is full of glee
Their fragrance brings peace sublime

Advice that is amusing
Easy to understand and charming
Simple moral education
Knowledge that appeals to emotion

I am grateful to all my well-wishers
The missionary press, the writers
Do read what before you I have kept
This precious gift of mine please do accept

3
Mother Dear

Our dear mother so hard-working
A kind-hearted soul and so loving

The ocean could not her depth compare
The skies could not her grandeur impair

Mother came to our little home
A symbol of knowledge did she become

For us she embodies the Goddess of knowledge
To enshrine her in our hearts we pledge

❖❖❖

To Jotiba with love

4

Salutations to Jotiba

I salute Jotiba from the very depths of my being
He gives us the nectar of knowledge and hope, a new way of living
The great Joti calls out to the weak, the untouchable, the outcast
Gives us the gift of knowledge and resurrects us from our past

❖❖❖

5
The Teachings of Jotiba

I pay my respects to Jotiba, my lord, so dear
His mellifluous words resonate in my ear

I serve the Mahar-Mang[1] considered outcasts
Memories of my beloved Lord fill my heart

The path of service and truth brings fulfillment
And fills one's soul with peace and contentment

I reflect upon Jotiba's words, see their reflection in my mind
They who serve with a philanthropic goal attain greatness amongst humankind

These are Jotiba's teachings gleaned from experience
I, Savitri, cherish them in the deep recesses of my conscience

❖❖❖

[1] Mahar and Mang are castes on the lowest rung of the caste-hierarchy, the members of which are treated as untouchables.

6
Path to Domestic Bliss

Jotiba fills my life with joy
As nectar does a flower

I am blessed with a man renowned
My happiness knows no bounds

Anxieties of bearing and rearing tiny tots
To struggle with this burden is a woman's lot

Running a household is no mean task
Will voicing the dilemma make it easier, I ask?

To maintain peace within the family
In domestic life is the best policy

❖❖❖

Ode to Ancestors

7
A Hymn for King 'Bali'[2]

The kingdom of 'Bali' was ruled by the holy demon-king
Bali was magnanimous, his subjects happy and never wanting

All were content in his kingdom; the three worlds sang his praises
In his self-existent lawful kingdom there were scientific discourses

Holy sacrificial fires were always burning; alms in gold were given aplenty
With bejeweled crowns adorning their heads, the royal couple presided over the charity

His wife, Vindhyawali was by his side on every occasion
Let's think of the ruling couple and sing their praises in unison

Our ancestors were they and their guide and teacher Shukranan
Their descendents are we; let's pay our respects with devotion

O holy, virtuous soul, King Bali
People sing your praises daily

[2] King Bali has been described in Hindu mythology as a demon-king who was known to be very magnanimous and one who tried to bring prosperity to all his subjects.

8
Chhatrapati Shivaji

Let's think of Chhatrapati Shivaji at the dawn of day
Our homage to the messiah of the outcasts and untouchables let's pay
As Nalraja, Yudishthir and Draupadi[3] in the Puranas we idolize
So in history, the image of Shivaji let us immortalize

❖❖❖

9
Queen Tarabai[4]

The monarch of the throne, Queen Tara
Jagdamba* of Kolhapur and Amba*[5] of Maharashtra

Raids the enemy camp to bring death and destruction
Defeats the enemy by her furious invasion
Soaks the battlefield with the blood of her foes
With the speed of lightning into battle she goes!

---

[3] Nalraja, Yudishthir and Draupadi were venerable personalities from the epic Mahabharata.

[4] Kolhapur was the seat of Rani Tarabai, the dowager queen and widow of Chatrapati Rajaram Maharaj, one of the sons of Chhatrapati Shivaji the king of the Marathas.

[5] *Different names of Goddesses in Hindu mythology.

The one and only Queen Tarabai of battle fame
Known for her courage, on the lips of warriors her name
Hail O Bhawani[6], we salute you O brave Queen Tara!
I pay my obeisance and sing the praises of this queen of valour

This great queen of Kolhapur
Graces the throne with such grandeur
Sword in right hand like Goddess Bhawani
The destroyer of demons, Tarabai the Rani

Tarabai, so valiant indeed
Resembles Goddess Chandi[7] in the battlefield
Goddess of war, worthy of veneration
At her feet I offer my salutation

[6] Bhawani is the name of the Hindu Goddess of war, who fought demons to establish good over evil.

[7] Chandi or Chandika is another name of the Goddess of war in Hindu mythology.

10
Meaning of the word 'Shudra*'

The word 'shudra' in truth, connoted a native
But the powerful victors made 'shudra' an invective

The ultimate victors, over the Iranis and the Brahmins
Over the Brahmins and the British; the most radical were the natives

Wealthy were they, the original inhabitants
They were known by the name of 'Indians'

Such heroic people were our ancestors, you see
And the descendents of such people are we

❖❖❖

* See footnote 27

Savitri the devotee

11
Prayer to Lord Shiva

Radiating Truth, Beauty and Goodness
Matted hair serving as a crown
Streams of knowledge
Cascading all around

Three-eyed, the third eye adorning his brow like a jewel
The Almighty Lord, all three worlds doth straddle
A swaying serpent around his shoulders doth writhe
Here walks He who all destinies doth write

Neelkanth[8], epitome of virtues and beauty
Of the sixty-four arts a repository
A divine garland around his neck
And with blossoms of salvation bedecked

To the ignorant giving knowledge complete
With all that is auspicious he is replete
For a loin cloth he wears a tiger-skin
Such is the image of Shiva - supreme

I worship thee Lord Shiva
God of gods, emanating radiance
Grant us the boon of freedom from ignorance
Savitri prays to you and pays her obeisance

❖❖❖

[8] Neelkanth – One of the many names of Lord Shiva, one of the trinity made up of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, Shiva being the more commonly known name of Mahesh.

12
Hymn to Lord Shiva

I chant thy hymn O Shiva
I sing it with devotion
Lord of the Universe, O Mahesha[9]
I greet thee with dedication

All matter and the three worlds move by His mercy
Who with his powers has created the primordial universe
I ask for this boon as I worship you Shambhu[10]
Bless my soul to compose the finest verse

❖❖❖

[9] Mahesh - One of the names of Lord Shiva.
[10] Shambhu - One of the many names of Lord Shiva.

13
Praise be to the Lord

We bow before thee O Shankara*, Shreedhara*
Neelkanth*, Shivashambhu*, Sadashiva*[11]

We fall at thy feet and beseech thee
Uplift us, is your ignorant children's plea

Grant us wisdom and knowledge
Thy children pray to thee

O' Shreedhara
Destroy the demon of misery

❖❖❖

[11] * All these are names of Lord Shiva.

Savitri the romantic

14
The Visionary Poet

A great devotee of the knowledge of poetry
A treasure trove of aesthetic versatility
From his tongue flow streams of poetry without rest
To be a visionary by Goddess Chandi he is blest

The Goddess sings verse through his being
Like the pure white Ganga from Shiva's hair flowing
Mellifluous words steady and slow
From the talented poet's lips do flow

His verse is like a sacred lake of sweet-scented blossoms
He builds there a castle of lotus flowers awesome
Of four skills and sixty-four arts
Finely ornamented with nine jewels of 'navrasas'[12]

At times imagines he is a friend of the universe
An act of creation is his verse
Divine compositions his poetry does comprise
Beauty, goodness and truth does it symbolize

❖❖❖

[12] The aesthetic experience (not the emotional experience itself) of the nine basic emotions.

15
Crazy Poetry and the Crazy Poet

The poet composes poetry from flights of fancy
Joys and sorrows imagines vividly
Experiences heavenly bliss one moment
And burns in the fires of hell the next instant

Cries one moment
Still crying begins to dance
And sings praises of the Lord
Whilst in a trance

His crazy poetry conjures unexpected things
So divinely does the poet sing
Lo and behold! An angel appears
Besotted with him, the poet she allures!

Smiles demurely
Talks sweetly
Draws him to her coaxingly
And kisses him passionately

This is the vision in the poet's mindscape

16
Fond Memories

Naigaon, my birth place, a rustic hamlet
Finds mention in many a ballad

As monkeys in the reign of Ram and foxes in the period of the Pandavas
Later the natives were known as 'Ratthavaunshis'[13] the ancestors of the Marathas

The great Shivaji built a kingdom of Maratha peasantry
Self-rule brought welfare and prosperity
The hamlet of Naigaon became a land of plenty

To the office of headmanship the Nevses were sworn
In this fine family as a daughter was I born

I adore this venerable land of my birth
And keep singing praises of its worth

A dozen village trades, castes and tribes
Happily together in this village reside

---

[13] Ratthavaunshis were believed to be the ancestors of the present day Maratha peasants.

Plentiful rains yield a bountiful harvest
In the garden near the well, fruits and flowers at their best

Melodious birdsong fills the air, butterflies flit around
Nature abounds in every sight and sound

Every peasant as magnanimous as the great King Bali[14]
And my village as prosperous as Kashyappur[15]of Bali

We are their descendants and never voice our woes
My place of birth inspires me to create these flowers
And those self-same blossoms on it I shower

❖❖❖

[14] See footnote 2
[15] Kashyappur was the name of King Bali's kingdom.

17
The Golden Champa[16]

The yellow champa flower
Of bright turmeric colour
This blossoming beauty stands apart
And silently does it steal my heart

Also known as
The Golden Champa
A jewel of nature
To my heart gives pleasure

A charming colour
Pomp and style
Its fragrance does
My mind beguile

Of goodness and truth
The crowning glory
An idol of
Perfect beauty

The colour of turmeric
Attaining one's goal
And the virtue of sacrifice
Does extol

[16] Champa - A flower with velvety, bright yellow petals and an intoxicating fragrance, commonly found in Maharashtra, India.

As Madan[17], his beloved
Rati* entices
So does the champa
Stir the poet's senses

To sneak into the mind
It does conspire
To create verse
It does inspire

Gratifies the gaze
Satiates the senses
Pleases the connoisseur
And then perishes

❖❖❖

[17] Madan is the God of love in Hindu mythology and Rati* is his beloved.

18
The Jaee[18] Flower

I was a-gazing at the delicate Jaee
And she seemed to look coyly at me

Pure white, exuding intoxicating fragrance
Enraptures me with her exquisite radiance

Her sweet smile and demure gaze
Send my mind into a daze

This five-petalled blossoming beauty
Seems to whisper something to me

What is it you want, I ask
She makes a wish smiling askance

The pretty bloom seems to request
Pluck me and hold me close to your breast

Use and discard is the way of the world
My fragrance is stolen and into the dust am I hurled

❖❖❖

[18] Jaee - A delicate white blossom that grows on a climber, well-known for its subtle perfume and ornate shape. It is commonly strung into garlands and worn traditionally by women in their hair in Maharashtra.

19
The Jaee Bud

Oh, what a beauty is this Jaee bud!

A rosy hue surrounds her
She looks so lovely and so tender

Her youthful form is full of grace
So pretty is her five-petalled face

The role of Rati[19] at night assumes
The Jaee bud fragrance exudes

Her end in destruction does find
The Jaee flower, like womankind!

❖❖❖

[19] Rati is the name of the beloved of the God of love, Madan, in Hindu mythology.

20
The Rose Flower

The Rose flower and Sweet Oleander
Though in appearance may be similar

One a swan the other a raven
As unlike as Lord Krishna[20]and Kansa[21] the demon

Can the little filly of a common man, Shyambhatt
Compare with Lord Indra's[22]majestic elephant, Airavat[23]?

Thus are the two flowers so opposed
Unique are the qualities of the Rose

As unique and sweet as the Rose the human race
Remember, thus Savitri spake

❖❖❖

[20] Krishna is the name of one of the deities in Hindu mythology.
[21] Kansa was the evil uncle of Krishna as the story goes.
[22] Indra is the Rain-God in Hindu mythology.
[23] Airavat was supposed to be the elephant that Lord Indra rode.

21
The Butterfly and the Bud

The butterfly so handsome
So beautiful, so winsome
Coral coloured eyes, sparkling
So expressive and smiling

Silky wings adorned
With spots of yellow big and small
Broken legs, yet takes flight
Flitting around with all its might

One sight of him and her heart is captured
The avid flower bud is enraptured
So beautiful is she and oh so tender
To him does she her heart surrender

With longing heart she pines for him
Endearingly she beckons to him
Dear butterfly come swiftly to me
Is the flower bud's silent plea

Down swoops the butterfly causing a stir
And nestles merrily beside her
The nectar-laden bud in a haze
Is drawn roughly into his embrace

He just shatters her beautiful form
And ravages her like a storm
Sucks her dry of all her nectar
Lifeless, wasted he discards her

Tastes her sweetness casts her away
Not a glance does he throw her way
Abandons her, finds pastures green
No sense of shame does he ever feel

Which flower bud? He conveniently asks
Forget the old and search anew is his task
Ways of the world deception and promiscuity
I am aghast! Says Savitri

22
Man and Nature

The rains have drenched the fields, bathed Nature pure and clean
Fruits, flowers and pulses all are invigorated and green

The pitter-patter of falling rain, Nature at her loveliest
In a shimmering sari with motifs of fruits and flowers bedecked

The koel[24] sings melodiously, the peacock sways and dances
Around the flowers, full of glee the pirate bee prances

Beautiful is nature, beautiful human beings, beautiful is all life
Let the rains of goodwill bring blossoms and wipe away all strife

Let's beautify human existence and make progress
Live and let live, get rid of all our fears and stress

Human beings and all of creation are but two sides of a coin
To preserve these priceless bounties let us our hands join

[24] A black singing bird found in India that signals the advent of spring.

23
Song of the Soil

Rich mother earth, of different hues
Some black, some white in the fields we use

The rich black soil yields a bounteous harvest
The fields with fruits and flowers are dressed

The white soil moulded, bricks and tiles does give
To make houses in the fields in which they live

Words cannot describe the glory of the soil
Oh! The deep bond of the earth with those who toil

❖❖❖

Savitri the teacher

24
Welcome Song

Come dear children, it is a beautiful day

I am pleased to greet you all today
And welcome you on this very fine day

The parents are all gathered here
Renowned personalities are also there

You honour us by your presence, you do!
With joy and humility we welcome you

Come dear children, come…

❖❖❖

25
The Greatest Wealth

At dawn my children let's perform our daily ablutions
Cleanse ourselves and greet our dear parents

Let's get busy with our lessons, to God our eternal guide pray
Don't let's stay at home and waste even a single day

Let knowledge be your God, pursue it all the way
With determination attain success; don't let your mind sway

Knowledge is so precious; it is the greatest gift of all
One with a treasury of knowledge, a wise person people do call;

❖❖❖

26
A Word of Advice

What you plan to do today, do it this very instant
What you plan to do at noon, go do it this moment
What you would do a moment later do it this second

For death does not stop to ask
"Have you finished all your tasks?"

❖❖❖

27
Walkie-Talkie Doll

So lovely is my dollie
Her name is Sonuli

I pick her up tenderly
And hold her before me

First she laughs then goes into a huff
And then begins to talk all kinds of stuff

Play with me dear sister says she
First throw me up and then catch me

What she asks I would not dare
How could I throw her up into the air?

Such games could cause a grave incident
Or bring about a fatal accident

Clutching her close to me
I kiss her cheeks and to her say

Such dangerous games let's not play
Death may seek bitter revenge some day

Play safe little one
Dear Sonuli, listen!
This is my advice to you, Sonu
And will always be of help to you;

❖❖❖

28
Group Discussion

(Each verse sung by a group of five girls)

First Group

The doors of Goddess Saraswati's court are ajar, come let's go
Let's go to school and gain knowledge, come on let's go
Let's go to school, come let's go

Second Group

What's there to see at the court? A sheer waste of time
Come let's play
There's nothing in the school, let's play ring-a –roses
Come let's play
Come on let's go and play

Third group

We don't agree, let's do the chores
Let's help at home and please mother instead
Mother will be pleased
Come let's go ahead

Fourth Group

Wait a while, what should we do?
Let's ask mother, come let's go
Should we play, do the housework or go to school
Let's ask her, come
Let's take her advice, come

Mother

To live with your head held high
Get an education, go to school
The real ornament of humankind is learning
Gain knowledge
Go to school, go to school

Your prime duty is to gain knowledge
Then come games and recreation
In your spare time lend a hand with the housework
But first and foremost go to school

All together

Let's go get an education in Goddess Saraswati's dwelling
Let's please the Goddess of knowledge and seek her blessing
Let's break the bondage of ignorance and penury
Let's cast away this life of age-old slavery

Don't pause to rest
In this knowledge quest
Take this golden opportunity
Time marches ahead swiftly

Let's not grumble or be lazy, to school let us go
Let's break the shackles of slavery, come on let's go

❖❖❖

29
Ignorance

Just one enemy do we have today
Let's thrash him and drive him away

None other of any kind
Look for him in your mind

Have you searched well?
Now can you tell?

Think my child and tell me quickly
Come spell out his name swiftly

Do you give up now?
Sure you don't know?

The name of this enemy I shall tell
Listen carefully, harken well

Ignorance!
Catch hold of him and thrash him blue
Drive him away from amongst you;

❖❖❖

Savitri the reformer

30
The Malady of the Outcasts

For two thousand years have outcasts suffered this malady
Of bonded labour; driven by the landlords into slavery

The mind revolts at this plight of humankind
What might their escape route be asks the mind

The best prescribed path for outcasts is education
Ends an animal existence and leads to salvation

31
So Says Manu[25]

Those who work in the fields and wield the plough
They are obtuse, says Manu

For the Brahmins it has been ordained indeed!
Says the 'Manusmriti',[26] "Don't toil in the field"

Sinners from their last birth are born as outcasts
In this birth do they pay for the sins of their past

The social customs created thus are based on discrimination
This policy of the shrewd and devious is oh so inhuman!

[25] Manu is credited with being the author of 'Manusmriti' which lays down the Hindu code of conduct and is believed to be composed in around 1,500 B.C.

[26] Manusmriti is a holy text in the Hindu religion believed to be written by Manu which lays down extremely rigorous and discriminatory social norms and dictates for the untouchables and for women.

32
Farming is Divine

Farming is divine, gives a harvest ripe
Food grains that are the essence of life

They who toil in the fields are the outcasts
They produce the food on which feast the upper castes

The latter behave as wantonly as drunkards do blabber
With a selfish motive driving them, they only jabber

They who do farming learn and gain knowledge
May they be blessed with wisdom and solace

❖❖❖

33
Pledge

A smooth round rock with a coat of oil and saffron
And lo and behold it becomes one of the Gods of the pantheon

Buffaloes and what not, such terrifying Gods
Yet people believe them to be their Lord

They pledge that they will sacrifice a goat
And if a child is born fulfill their oath

If rocks can answer prayers and grant them children
What's the need for marriage between men and women?

Says Savitri, do contemplate over every little thing
And make your life truly worth living

34
Should they be called Humans?

No knowledge, no learning
No affinity for either
A brain that lies fallow
Should they be called humans?

Craving free food on a platter
Even animals know better
No contemplation, no action
Should they be called humans?

No dearth of children
But no urge to work
And provide for them
Do they deserve to be called humans?

No sympathy forthcoming
No help from any quarter
Not bothered, one way or the other
Should they be called humans?

Content to believe in what the stars foretell
Even animals do not share
Their vision of heaven and hell
Why then do we call them humans?

The woman from dawn to dusk doth labour
The man lives off her toil, the free-loader
Even birds and beasts labour together
Should these idlers still be called humans?

Steeped in abject poverty
Apparent to everybody
Drawing forth sheer contempt
Should they be called humans?

Unable to read and write
Not open to advice of any kind
Fail to comprehend what even animals do
Should they be called humans?

Unashamed of an animal existence
Content and happy in their complacence
Signs of a sub-human existence
Can they still be called humans?

Extending a helping hand to others
Service, sacrifice, compassion
Devoid of all these qualities fine
Should they yet be called humans?

No sorrow at being enslaved
Nor freedom from slavery craved
No understanding of humanity
Can they be called humans?

Birds, beasts, apes and humans
Life and death to all is common
Oblivious of this basic truth
And we still call them humans!

❖❖❖

35
The Dependence of the Shudras[27]

The outcasts and untouchables, hounded by ignorance
Gods, religion, rites and rituals, drained by their indigence

No longing for happiness, assume misery to be their lot
"Live as God has created you", is what they have been taught

Wandering without work, the Brahmin hermits beg for alms
Order the 'Shudras' to do free service as virtuous tasks

Ignorance blindfolds them; they fail to see their misery
In abject dependence they live verily

❖❖❖

[27] A caste low down in the caste hierarchy.

36
Awaken to a New Dawn

Rise my brethren, O outcasts, awake and arise!
To escape the bondage of tradition, rise!
O brethren, for knowledge arise!

Manu's disciples, the Peshwas[28] are dead and gone, now the English are here
Gone is Manu's ban on education, the onward path is clear

The English educators have arrived, brush aside your fears
Such a golden opportunity has not come your way in a thousand years

Let's educate our children and ourselves explore horizons new
Let's expand our frontiers and gain an ethical world view

Let us pledge to gain knowledge with a fierce determination
And wipe out the curse of centuries of caste discrimination

In this kingdom of Bali to knowledge let's gain access
Let trumpets and drumbeats proclaim our success

Ward off the "evil eye" and keep Brahmins at bay
"Don't cross our path o meddlesome priests, stay away!!"

With this clarion call arise and strive hard to gain knowledge
Rise for education; break the shackles of tradition and bondage!

❖❖❖

[28] Peshwas were upper caste, Brahmin rulers who ruled Mahrashtra in the 18th century.

37
Golden Chance

To attain self-reliance let us pledge
And accumulate a wealth of knowledge

Without learning, life is an animal existence, a waste
Don't rest, get an education, make haste

The outcasts can wipe away their woes if they wish
Here's a golden chance to learn English

Learn English and do away with caste discrimination
Cast away the tiresome tales of the Brahmins to damnation

❖❖❖

38
Mother English 1

Gone is the reign of the 'Peshwas'
Mother English is with us

Deep darkness of despair
The fear of heaven and hell is there
Thoughts of inferiority plague the mind
In such dark times… mother English has arrived

Cast away the yoke of custom
Prise open the doors of tradition
Learn to read and write
Good times have come… mother English has arrived

The Brahmanic religion with innumerable ruses
Exploits the 'Shudras', showers abuses
Only on account of ignorance, Savitri muses
Dead and gone is the 'Peshwa' dominance … mother English is amidst us

The sovereignty of the Brahmins has been burnt to ashes
The wise English have emerged victorious
The outcasts stand to gain from these changes
The death knoll of 'Manusmriti' has been sounded…
The rule of mother English has been founded

The outcasts rest in the cooling shade of knowledge
The untouchables are helped and encouraged
The English rule has brought respite from caste-terror…
Here comes our English saviour

India belongs to none
Iranis, Europeans, Tartars or the Huns
The blood of the natives flows in its veins
Let us cry aloud and proclaim… that mother English is here

❖❖❖

39
Mother English 2

Mother English, so clear of speech
Resurrects the 'shudras' with powers within her reach

This is mother English, not the Mughals[29]
Nor the reign of fools, the Peshwas[30]

Mother English true knowledge doth give
Lovingly grants the 'shudras' a chance to live

Mother English feeds the 'shudras' the milk of human kindness
Nurtures them and gives them confidence

Mother English ends their beastly existence
Grants human dignity to the 'shudras' with her able guidance

❖❖❖

[29] Mughals ruled over the Indian subcontinent from around the 16th to the early 18th century.

[30] Peshwas were upper caste, Brahmins who ruled Mahrashtra in the 18th Century

40
True Saints are They

Those who practise what they preach
They are the men and women worthy of worship

They who are committed to serve humanity
And in it find bliss; are of worship worthy

Be they happy or unhappy, never selfish are their ways
Altruists all the way, truly great are they

Human relations those who discern
Says Savitri, the title of saints do earn

Dialogue at dawn

41
A Dialogue between Savitri and Jotiba

Savitri: The moon rests, the sun rises
Setting the eastern horizon on fire
Jotiba, my lord, look towards the east
On this glorious scene let us our eyes feast

Jotiba: Come let's both go into the garden
And watch this scene with beauty laden
The pink, spinning disc of the sun
Slowly rising on the horizon

Butterflies are flitting around the flowers
The birds whistle merrily in the bowers
Sweet-scented breeze, nature in bloom
The night though is in deep gloom

Savitri: To keep all creation in the dark is the night's desire
She wills it to be steeped in darkness forever
The owl's desire is such a one
It flings curses at the rising sun

The venomous night of death is gone
Creation is awash with the radiance of dawn

Jotiba: Your words are so true, the darkness is dispelled
The Mahars[31] and untouchables have woken from their spell
That the downtrodden may always ignorance suffer
And be rendered inhuman is the owl's desire
Confine the cock, yet it crows in the morn
It brings the glad tidings of the dawn

Savitri: The night of doom and ignorance is gone
This sun has woken up one and all
Jotiba is the sun on the untouchables' horizon
Risen so radiant beyond all comparison

Our goal of humanity let us preach
The heights of humanity let us reach

This translation is based on the collection of Savitribai's poems, 'Kavyaphule' (1854) as published in 'Savitribai Phule, Samagra Vangmay' in Marathi, edited by Dr. M. G. Mali, Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai, 2006 (First edition, March 1988).

[31] Mahar is the name of one of the castes whose members are considered untouchables in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

When Lalitha Dhara first approached me with this project I was awed at the thought of translating the work of such an iconic and historical figure and yet it seemed to be a very exciting proposal. Savitribai Phule's entire life and work has been a source of immense inspiration for all of us women activists. Hence I started working on the project with great reverence and zeal coupled with a tremendous sense of responsibility.

Translating poetry is in itself a difficult task and interpreting poetry written in the old Marathi language of those times was an even greater challenge. I refreshed my knowledge about the struggle against caste hierarchy and patriarchy in Maharashtra. This helped me to become familiar with that period and the context in which the poems were written. Despite all this I still had to struggle to interpret Savitribai's verse as accurately as possible and translate the prevalent cultural ethos into a foreign language where parallels for certain indigenous beliefs, mythology, values, customs and even flora and fauna were often difficult to come by. I unabashedly approached every person who possessed a profound knowledge of Marathi and an equal mastery over English. I wish to thank all my friends for their genuine help. I am grateful to my daughter Shikha for boosting my morale whenever I felt unsure of myself, my mother, Mrs. Hemalata Mhatre, a retired Marathi teacher and my aunt Dr. Kumud Mantri for their patient and consistent help whenever I was stumped at some phrase or line. Last but not least, I thank Lalitha Dhara for giving me this rare opportunity and for being a constant source of encouragement and literary assistance.

The driving force behind this translation is one of commitment to the cause of the oppressed castes and women. Despite my good intentions and hard work there are bound to be errors and shortcomings. My sincere request to all those who read this book is to forgive any mistakes in the translation. Hoping that this translation takes the creative work of the first woman teacher of Maharashtra to a much wider readership, across state boundaries to non-Marathi readers throughout the country and hopefully even beyond that.

Ujjwala Mhatre

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE'S LIFE AND WORK

1831	Born in Naigaon in the district of Satara, Mahrashtra
1840	Married to Jotirao Phule
1841	Began informal education at home
1847	Trained as a teacher from Pune
1848	Established the first school with husband Jotirao at Pune
1849	Turned out of her in-laws' home with husband for teaching "untouchables" and lower castes
1852	Model Teacher's Award for the Phules
1852	Felicitated by the Department of Education for their pioneering educational work
1854	'Kavyaphule', first collection of poems, published
1856	Edited and published Jotirao's speeches
1863	Established a home for pregnant widows and their children
1868	Threw open their well to "untouchables"
1873	Co-founded Satyashodhak Samaj with Jotiba Phule
1874	Adopted Yashwant, son of a Brahman widow
1875	Led Satyashodhak volunteers to help famine-affected people
1892	'Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar', verse collection, and her speeches published
1893	Took over leadership of Satyashodhak Samaj, elected its president
1896	Worked intensively during drought
1897	Died while attending to plague-affected people

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   - compiled and edited by Lalitha Dhara

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   - compiled and edited by Lalitha Dhara

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These fragrant flowers I offer thee
Strung in a garland of rhymes
Each poetic blossom is full of glee
Their fragrance brings peace sublime

Savitri Jotirao Phule

Savitri Jotirao Phule is credited with being the first native teacher of girls in Maharashtra. She also happens to be the first modern, radical, Marathi poet.

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